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AUTHOR DuCharme, Catherine C.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the life and works of Margaret McMillan and Maria Montessori, two advocates for the poor who played a significant role in social and educational reform in Britain and Italy, respectively, in the late 19th- and early 20th century. The upbringing, education, and social milieu of the two women are compared, as well as their philosophy and educational outlook. The paper notes that both women had a deep concern for the misfortunes of the poor and oppressed, understood the importance of good health and nutrition in the lives of children, and began schools to educate the children of the less fortunate. They had a deep sense of commitment and a broad vision for the improvement of all humanity through working with children in poverty. The paper concludes that today's educators and child advocates can learn a great deal from the lives of McMillan and Montessori. (MDM)

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Margaret McMillan and Maria Montessori: Champions of the Poor

Catherine C. DuCharme, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor in Early Childhood Education

College of Education

California State University, Long Beach

1250 Bellflower Boulevard

Long Beach, California 90840-2201

USA

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Margaret McMillan and Maria Montessori: Champions of the Poor

The last decades of the nineteenth century were a period of rapid urban and industrial growth in Italy and England. Attracted by the prospect of work in the new factories, people flocked to the cities. Their rewards included grossly overcrowded, low-grade housing and grueling work in poor conditions for little money.

Children were seen by many parents as investments as contributors to the family budget and not as persons in their own right. Child labor in the factories was common and not until 1922 was this practice abolished. In 1894 in England it was possible for eleven-year-olds to attend school for half a day only and work the other half.

At the turn of the century, Britain and Italy had periods of relative prosperity. The gradual industrialization of their economies had improved the lot of the masses. However, the living and working conditions in the urban slums were abysmal. Margaret McMillan described the harsh realities:

> "The stained and tumbling walls, the dark, noisy courts, the crowded rooms, the sodden alleys all hidden behind roaring streets...Women who care no more. Girls whose youth is a kind of defiance. Children creeping on the filthy pavement, half-naked, unwashed and covered with sores...Many children live in one-roomed tenements. From these close-packed chambers where they sleep, the mother as well as the children, departs in many cases in the

morning. Of 110 boys,...44 had a mother at home...of the other 66, the mother was dead or at work all day" (Bradburn, 1989, p. 72).

Despite poor wages, the families were large. Although the average number of children in a family was five, many English mothers had fourteen, sixteen, eighteen or even twenty children! There was rarely enough room for two beds, so the whole family usually slept in one bed at the end of the room! It was impossible for families to care for their own children. In the slums of Rome and London, half-starved children roamed the streets. Children had neither adequate food or clothing.

Medical examinations were difficult as children were layered and stitched into their clothes. One doctor said:

> "It seemed as if many of the children on obtaining a new garment put it on over the old ones and in fact carried all their property on their backs. In such cases when one arrived at the skin it was always found to be in a condition of unwholesome perspiration, although the weather was cold. On the other hand, a great number of the children were shockingly underclad. One little girl had an ingenious costume which looked quite smart until analyzed. It consisted of a very thin chemise - a footman's old red waistcoat folded tightly round her and fastened with a piece of string, and a blue overall, with straps over the shoulders. It looked like a very neat dress, but was shamefully inadequate... Another curious fact was that large numbers of the children were absolutely

stitched into their clothes" (Bradburn, 1989, p. 91).

Another doctor stated in 1894 that during a medical inspection it was found that of 300 children examined, "100 had not taken their clothes off for over six months - they were sewn into them (Bradburn, 1989, p. 50). Overall, doctors examining the children found the children to be fleabitten and verminous, starved, dwarfed, deformed, in need of glasses, etc.

In the San Lorenzo district, a slum of Rome, children were left unattended; during the days while their parents went out to work, those children old enough to get around but too young for school ran wild throughout the buildings defacing the newly whitewashed walls and using their ingenuity on whatever other petty acts of vandalism they could invent. Maria Montessori described the children who came to the Children's House:

> "They were tearful, frightened children, so timid that I could not get them to speak. Their faces were expressionless, their eyes bewildered as if they had never seen anything before in their lives. They were in fact poor, neglected children who had been reared in dark, decrepit home without anything to stimulate their minds. Anyone could have seen that they were undernourished, that they needed to be fed and exposed to the open air and sun. They were like buds that seemed never destined to bloom" (Montessori, 1936/1966, p. 115).

It was within this context that McMillan and Montessori became champions of the poor and unfortunate children.

Margaret McMillan and Maria Montessori lived and worked as contemporaries and

although we know that McMillan knew of Montessori's work, it is unclear as to whether or not the two ever met to discuss their common interests. There was an age difference of ten years between them, Margaret having been born a decade preceding Montessori's birth in 1870. When Montessori, aged thirty seven, opened the first Children's House in 1907, McMillan, then forty seven years old, was battling for school medical inspections and one year later in 1908 opened a health clinic to serve unfortunate families. A review of McMillan's life and at least the first forty years of Montessori's life reveals that in many ways these two extraordinary women were similar in character and shared common goals for improving the conditions of children living in poverty.

Similarities in their personalities and character emerge from anecdotes of their childhood. Both women inherited a tradition of aiding humanity fallen victims to poverty and disease.

McMillan's parents were Scottish; her father a member of the clan Macmillan whose family crest displayed a two-handed sword symbolizing the obligation of successive generations to defend the unfortunate. Her biographer, Elizabeth Bradburn (1989), states that "even at an early age Margaret seems to have reflected on some of the deeper questions of life such as suffering and the unequal distribution of wealth" (p. 8). Margaret herself said, "I was puzzled by God and Heaven, and Hell, and Death, and Sin. But I was also puzzled to know why some people were rich and others poor..." (Bradburn, 1989, p. 8-9).

McMillan's biographer and longtime friend tells about her parading the playgrounds at school with one or two like-minded, no doubt discussing some subject far beyond their years. One who knew her wrote:

> "Even in childhood people noticed and commented on her withdrawn, other-worldish air. This was perhaps partly occasioned by the deafness from which she suffered..And even when she regained her hearing, she never quite lost the habit of living apart" (Bradburn, 1989, p. 10).

During Margaret's childhood, Sundays revolved around the church. They attended the Free High Church which was a very lively institution with an ear open to the world's needs. The congregation's benevolence and interest in other countries probably helped to develop her thoughts about her own responsibility towards those less fortunate than herself. Rita Kramer (1988), Montessori's biographer, writes that Montessori "was expected to help her less fortunate neighbors, and had a daily quota of knitting to do for the poor" (p. 25).

With regard to Montessori's personality, stories of her childhood suggest that she was a bit bossy and intolerant with her peers (Standing, 1984). She exuded self-confidence and was strong-willed. Montessori's followers tell of the time when Montessori was ten years old, she was seriously ill, but she told her anxious mother, "Do not worry, Mother, I cannot die; I have too much to do" (Kramer, 1988, p. 28). She had a voracious appetite for books and was enthusiastic about her studies. As a young child she was bossy and as a young adult she became competitive. She decided to go on to a technical school rather than

pursue classical studies like most young women that furthered their education. "She knew what she was good at, she welcomed challenge, she chose the more difficult course rather than avoiding it. And she chose it to please herself" (Kramer, 1988, p. 29).

Montessori's "self-confidence, her optimism, her interest in change, and her belief in the possibility of effecting it were certainly formed by the interaction of her robust, aggressive constitution and the child-rearing practices of her mother" writes her biographer (Kramer, 1988, p. 29).

Both Montessori and McMillan were excellent students though they both commented later in life that the methods of education they experienced taught them what school should not be! McMillan recalled, "There was a teacher who knocked my ribbons off when I didn't know what he said. I used to sit and dream of another world where Rachel and Mother were with me and it was all beautiful..." (Bradburn, 1989, p. 10). About her later schooling at the Inverness Academy, McMillan felt that girls at the academy were trained to be ridiculous snobs, and that her school life made her a rebel and also a reformer. The "chalk and talk" method so common in Italy and the overemphasis on drill and repetition of discrete facts was not conducive to real learning; Montessori referred to the repressive system when she likened the children to "butterflies mounted on pins, [are] fastened each to his place, the desk, spreading the useless wings of barren and meaningless knowledge which they have acquired" (Kramer, 1988, p. 95). Both women would use these experiences to create methods of education that would be more open enabling individuals to explore

their environment.

Montessori "was tough, independent, and not inclined to surrender to self-doubts. Self-direction, stubbornness, and intuitions that proved valid as well as original were characteristics that appeared early in her life and shaped her career" writes Kramer (1988, p. 45-46).

Throughout McMillan's childhood we can see the development of religious training, love of nature, and concern for humanity.

Neither McMillan nor Montessori chose early childhood education as their first career. McMillan embarked on a career as a governess, and taught English at a school for girls in Geneva. She continued her own studies and was influenced by a Russian revolutionist named Vera who challenged Margaret not to concentrate on teaching the rich but to work for the poor as "it is not only a privilege, it is the only real work possible" (Bradburn, p. 16).

Margaret became restless with her life and yearned to discover her life's direction. After an unsuccessful love affair, the details which have become buried in Victorian tradition, she went to work as a governess tutoring the children of Reverend Edward Farrington Clayton. It was during this time that she had a dynamic religious experience and a new transforming friendship with God emerged. According to her biographer, Elizabeth Bradburn, "this renewed relationship is the key to an understanding of the rest of her life; the social work in which she later became involved was cradled in it" (Bradburn, p. 17).

Margaret described the event to a friend in a letter:

> "Then it came - the real event. Dear it is never an earthly event at all...one night - well it came. I know what are called the Invisible Powers, that they are near us all, but reach us I think only after suffering and prayer...I don't understand much. Can explain nothing - only that beyond these voices there are others and the others matter most. And the ordinary person can be great, powerful - all powerful if he can get tuned to be the Instrument of the Unseen. I got only a little tuned, so very little..." (Bradburn, p. 17-18).

Both women, although they read voraciously and were free thinkers in their youth, came to depend on their religious roots in adulthood. Margaret's religious experience described earlier occurred in 1889 when she was thirty nine. Montessori became more religious after her son's birth; she withdrew every summer for two weeks to meditate among the nuns in a convent. Montessori believed that she had a mission in life and although she was not always certain of the results of her work and study, she prepared herself for an "unknown mission".

Montessori began her professional life as one of the first female doctors in Italy. She was particularly interested in children's diseases and spent much of her time in the children's and women's wards of the hospital. In discussing her patients' reaction to a female doctor, Montessori told a reporter: "I assure you that they ask for me, they want me...They know intuitively when someone really cares about them" (Kramer, 1988, p. 52).

Montessori gave her patients care that went far beyond what was expected of a physician. One of her friends remarked that she had difficulty separating the nurse's duty from the doctor's. She consulted and prescribed as well as nursed her patient and even if necessary cleaned things up and cooked a nourishing meal for them.

Genuine care and concern for less fortunate people is a thread that runs through both Montessori's and McMillan's lives. Both women received letters from appreciative parents who felt that they owed their children's lives to their efforts and attention. Montessori's mother had a drawer filled with letters from grateful relatives of patients. McMillan was prepared to go to any lengths herself to help sick and deformed children receive the medical treatment they needed; she often visited the homes of ill children and pleaded with parents to get treatment for their little ones. A letter from one parent indicates that McMillan visited one home three times a week for an entire year until the mother was persuaded to allow her son to receive an operation to correct his cleft palette.

Montessori and McMillan knew the importance of health in the lives of young children. As a member of the Bradford school board, McMillan (as early as 1896) fought for school meals, school baths, and medical inspections. Similarly, Montessori regarded the serving of food in the schools as a "necessity of the first order". She also designed special baths for the children attending the Children's Houses in the early 1900s. Both women decried the importance of prevention rather than cure when discussing child health. Montessori lectured on the need to rethink the old idea of the aim of charity as the relief

of existing social miseries and to focus efforts on preventing them. She pointed to examples such as kitchens offering the poor a wholesome diet and sanitary shelter with the idea of preventing tuberculosis which she reminded her audience was in the long run a more economical expenditure of public funds than waiting to treat patients in the hospitals. McMillan also forcefully used this line of argument in her many speeches and writings on the needs of children in the slums in London.

As educators, both were significantly influenced by Seguin's work. McMillan had studied many different educational philosophies and methods, but she was particularly drawn towards Seguin. She embraced his view that "to make the child feel that he is loved, and to make him eager to love in his turn, is the end of our teaching as it has been its beginning" (Bradburn, 1989, p. 58). McMillan advocated freer methods of teaching and as a member of the Bradford school board, she collaborated with the headmistress of Belle Vue School to conduct some experiments based upon Seguin's methods in 1896 before Montessori's experiments at the Children's House:

> "In Belle Vue School, Bradford, in the year 1896, I began, with the head-mistress, certain experiments, founded on the principles of Seguin...A very deliberate training of the basal sense of touch was begun, by means of a scale of materials of textures varying from the smoothest satin to the rough surface of fretted wood. The children touched these with closed eyes; they practiced writing on sand and also drawing by touch on low boards and easels.

Finally stained canvas was stretched all round the rooms, tables, floor, any surface was made available for writing and drawing, and a color wheel and scales of colored paper were introduced, by means of which the gradation and naming of colors went on apace. Needless to say, we had by this time found that the old furniture was impossible. All forms and desks were eschewed, and the infant room furnished with tiny chairs with rounded backs and feather light table! Delivered from the notion that utter stillness was a virtue, the children skipped about the room freely..." (Bradburn, 1989, p. 58-59).

Montessori experimented with Seguin's work as well at the Children's House creating materials for the children for what she called auto-education.

Montessori brought plants and animals for the children to tend to themselves. Similarly, in the open-air nurseries, McMillan emphasized nature and carefully selected plants and herbs that would allow the children to experience the greatest variety in scents and smells and tastes. As educators, the women emphasized freedom of movement and the importance of spontaneity, interest, and choice of activities. Both remained true to Seguin's views on loving and respecting children. They also showed tremendous respect for the parents of the children they worked with - never criticizing them, or talking down to them.

Montessori's biographer, Rita Kramer, states: "Bringing the parents of the slum children in the first Casa dei Bambini into the schools at all and involving them in the school life of their children -was an innovation. For working-class parents to be expected

to confer with their children's teachers about their children's education was revolutionary in 1907" Kramer, 1988, p. 119). In 1918, when the Rachel McMillan open-air nursery was opened, parents were involved in classes to learn more about child-rearing and home-making and teachers were able to learn more from the mothers about the children they taught. For both McMillan and Montessori, the school was a part of the larger community. Both envisioned the school as the environment in which the transformation of humankind would be effected.

Montessori and McMillan were exemplary child advocates. They utilized their talents as writers and orators to champion their causes on behalf of little ones. Montessori was an eloquent speaker and attracted large audiences.

> "Everywhere, she spoke to capacity audiences, the halls always crowded with the city's leading citizens, including most of the prominent women of the community. Newspapers gave advance news of her appearances and reported in detail on her talks, sometimes reprinting them in full. Everywhere the comments were the same - the audience had been completely won over by her youth, her beauty, her charm, her sincerity. It was sometimes hard to believe they were not describing a diva of opera or the stage. But there was always praise for the message as well as the messenger. Reports of her effectiveness as a propagandist on behalf of causes for which she spoke also went into detail about the causes themselves. She had become a well-known personality and the

public turned out to see and hear the winning feminist cum physician, the "beautiful scholar" they had read about" (Kramer, 1988, p. 78-79).

Likewise, McMillan often spoke to audiences of thousands. Her impassioned speeches on education greatly moved her audiences. One eyewitness remarked:

> "When she stood up to speak it seemed that a holy calm pervaded the room. She had a lovely face. One never noticed her dress because her face and quiet and still bearing held one's attention to her last word" (Bradburn, 1989, p. 53).

Another said:

> "People walked five or seven or more miles into Bradford to hear the speakers. Long before the scheduled time, the hall was packed with some 4,000 or more people when Margaret McMillan was due to be the speaker. A thrill of expectancy used to surge through the hall. Of all the speakers, it was she who lifted that vast audience to spiritual heights" (Bradburn, 1989, p. 53).

McMillan and Montessori had profound influence on others. As leaders, they displayed very different styles. McMillan encouraged her staff to share in the decision making process; she never treated them like puppets, they were more than colleagues, they were partners in a joint enterprise. Margaret's personality and commitment to helping children ignited and inspired her co-workers. It was Margaret's custom to initiate ideas but to include others in their execution. She trusted teachers to teach well. "She saw teachers as discoverer, inventors, and improvers of methods" (Bradburn, 1989, p. 213). She was a

team player and never underestimated the potential of a group with a common aim.

On the other hand, Montessori worked primarily without collaborators choosing to surround herself with loyal followers without dissenting points of view. This is one of the most drastic differences between the two women. McMillan was more democratic in her approach and Montessori tended to be an autocrat.

Matina Horner, in the preface to Kramer's biography, reminds us that the story of a life "illuminates history, inspires by example, and fires the imagination to life's possibilities" and that reflecting upon "other people's experiences encourages us to persist, to face hardship, and to feel less alone." Margaret McMillan and Maria Montessori, as champions of the poor, faced incredible challenges as they attempted to meet the needs of forgotten children yet they were successful. Their leadership and influence extended far beyond the borders of the nations in which they served as social activists. What then can we learn from them and in what ways can their lives inform our own?

First and foremost, McMillan and Montessori had a deep sense of commitment and a broad vision for the improvement of all humanity through working with children in poverty. McMillan is quoted as saying, "All children are mine". Montessori's longtime friend and biographer, E.M. Standing, wrote that Montessori's "mission in life had crystallized...She felt the duty of going forth as an apostle on behalf of all the children in the world, born and as yet unborn, to preach for their rights and their liberation" (Standing, 1984, p. 61-62). McMillan's biographer, Bradburn, writes: "For behind all her different

activities, including her schemes for young children, stand her vision of a more just, equitable and caring society, and her unswerving commitment to the creation of it" (Bradburn, 1989, p. 226). Both women worked tirelessly for children; their pattern of work giving way to periods of extreme exhaustion followed by renewed energy to continue the important work.

Both women appeared to sustain their efforts through inner strength from spiritual power. They had deep respect for human beings regardless of their social class and earthly position. They had little tolerance for rhetoric and challenged individuals and nations alike to action.

There is much we can learn from them as child advocates. They used their oratory skills to inform the public of the needs of children in the slums. McMillan gathered statistics and gave them life in her speeches as she related actual case studies of children. Both women used the press artfully to champion their cause; McMillan used the radio and if she was living today, she would have used the television to inform the public of the perils of children living in poverty. In addition, they worked locally while challenging others to replicate their efforts. McMillan initiated many local efforts which were later used as models for like programs. McMillan and Montessori mingled with community leaders and were comfortable with people regardless of their social class; they used their contacts to fund important work for children. And although both women received opposition towards their ideas of healthcare and education for forgotten children, they remained undaunted.

The lives and work of Maria Montessori and Margaret McMillan offer inspiration, courage and hope for those of us that continue the fight against poverty amongst children in this country. Their lives challenge us as well. Margaret McMillan expected teachers to have their eyes on the future and be part of a continuous upward movement in society. She remarked in 1907:

> "The classroom of today is not the classroom of yesterday. It is full of new light - and of new shadows. As time goes on, some will make strange discoveries. And some for the sake of comfort, may pull down the blinds. But the brave will not pull down the blinds. They will go on fearlessly to note conditions - to unearth the causes of defect, disease, suffering, and failure, to set these open to the sunshine of an enlightened public opinion, and to lay the foundations of a happier order of social life, and a new era of human progress" (Bradburn, 1989, p. 235).

Today one in four children live in poverty without adequate food, clothing, and health care. Will we "pull down the blinds" or will we re-discover the power of the individual as exemplified by McMillan and the young Montessori and accept their challenge to ACTION?

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